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## REGENERATIVE ORGANIZATIONS: INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

**Pablo Muñoz\***

Professor of Entrepreneurship  
Business School  
Durham University  
United Kingdom  
[pablo.munoz-roman@durham.ac.uk](mailto:pablo.munoz-roman@durham.ac.uk)

&

Universidad Del Desarrollo  
Santiago, Chile

**Oana Branzei**

Professor Strategy & Sustainability  
Ivey Business School  
Western University  
Canada  
[obranzei@ivey.ca](mailto:obranzei@ivey.ca)

*\* Corresponding author. The two co-authors have contributed equally.*

# **REGENERATIVE ORGANIZATIONS: INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE**

## **Abstract**

This special issue presents six articles and two invited editorials that explore the antecedents, mechanisms, and consequences of regenerative organizing. Together, they draw on a range of disciplines from both organizational and environmental sciences to discover, theorize, and illustrate life-giving intersections between humans and natural ecosystems in Anthropocene. This introduction provides an overview of the reasons for, and especially the possibilities of, regenerative organizing as we stress the limits of planetary boundaries in a post-climate change world.

## **1 Our relationship with nature**

The way modern human life is organized has proven ecologically damaging (Heikkurinen et al., 2016). With our ‘progress’ as a species, natural ecosystems have undergone radical changes. Biodiversity has been lost and temperatures continue to rise, threatening the existence of entire living systems, and our existence as well. Indeed, we know that biodiversity loss could substantially diminish the benefits that people derive from nature (Isbell et al., 2017). We would be surprised if this comes as a shock to the reader. This is our making. The industrial revolution equipped humankind with superpowers - over and beyond nature we still believe - which have led us to play a new and central role in the geology and ecology of the earth. In this new era, and for the first time, humans are leaving permanent geological markers in the stratospheric record of the planet (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). Welcome to the Anthropocene.

Linear thinking, siloed understanding of the world, and human-nature dualism are at the core of anthropocentrism (Purser et al. 1995; Heikkurinen et al., 2021). This has been fueled by misleading convictions regarding human cleverness, technological dominance, and egocentric organizational orientation (Jackson, 2009; Purser et al. 1995).

At the core of the latter, there is the modern relationship humans have developed with nature, which is a rather strange one. We are part of nature but, somehow, we have been progressively detaching ourselves from it, creating cognitive, experiential, and emotional fault lines between the human world and the world of other living and non-living species. Those still finding ways to live in deep connection to nature are seen as outliers. The real threat is our growing disconnect from nature, and increasing inability to reconnect with it. Humans and nature share the same threat: our changing climate reflects a loss of vital human evolutionary experience. We forget where our food comes from, and indeed most of what we are consuming today is not food (Pollan, 2009). We enjoy zoos and the occasional YouTube live cams that humanize endangered species while we keep them on the menu. We rarely think of them as other than support, service, or entertainment. We do not take the animals' experiences seriously and our once life-giving relationship with the other species sharing our planet has become unsustainable (Mance, 2021). As Gregory Bateson (2000) famously said in his "Ecology of Mind": *The major problems in the world are the result of the difference between how nature works and the way people think.*

Yet, humans possess an innate tendency to seek connections with nature and other forms of life (Kellert & Wilson, 1993; Nisbet et al. 2008). We crave a re-connect with natural ecosystems, for instrumental, emotional, and evolutionary reasons (Passmore & Howell, 2014). We have indeed co-evolved with some species, developing, for example, unique bonds with dogs (Garfield, 2020). What makes this relationship special is that, in most cases, both species benefit from this rich, complicated and rewarding relationship. Forest bathing is another example, with evidence showing that the (mindful) exposure to nature and green environments has a range of health benefits for human systems (Hansen et al. 2017). Noticing nature (Passmore & Holder, 2017) offers precious occasions for becoming a little less selfish (Zhang et al. 2014) and a lot more

cooperative (Zelenski et al. 2015). By rekindling our evolutionary capacity for collective action, human-nature interfaces prepare us to tackle the grand challenges of our times (Howard-Grenville et al., 2019).

## **2. When organizations meet nature**

A growing number of sub-domains within organization and management studies have touched on the many reasons for, and especially the urgency of, reclaiming human-nature connections. Several recent studies flagged the almost insurmountable divides between the timing and the scale of human and natural ecosystems (Bansal et al. 2018). Yet modern social and environmental problems, such as deforestation, desertification, pollution, inequality, healthy food, and biodiversity loss, can only be effectively addressed if we overcome these fault lines and interlink multiple scales (Isbell et al., 2017).

Most of the current scholarly work is focused on understanding how firms navigate through tensions, risks, and opportunities inherent to or derived from environmental degradation, and whether and how paying attention to environmental issues is beneficial for the business. When it comes to conceptualizing organization - nature relationships, management scholarship tends to position the organization at the center of its frameworks and models. It also positions ecological systems as one of many peripheral circles, enabling and constraining their actions (Elkington 1999). There is a quest, even an expectation, for win-win solutions. Resources have long been partitioned as natural and human, failing to recognize the unique, life-giving combinations that can only emerge and evolve in connection.

Despite many global calls for action, the next generation feels the existential uncertainty of this chasm widening. The presumed, prevailing dualism between human organizations and nature

(Purser et al. 1995; Good & Thorpe, 2020) frames our research agenda from an organization rather than organism centric point of view, asking how the increasing scarcity or fragility of nature as a resource shortchanges firms, industries, and organizational environments (Etzion, 2016). Such a de-natured view of the world diminishes the biocapacity and natural resources and the human creativity that can flourish on our closer connection with nature. It is time to enliven the sustainable development debate by shifting attention from economic to ecological rationality (Banerjee 2003).

Acknowledging planetary boundaries (Whiteman et al., 2012) and considering nature as nature opens up new research questions that reveal, and help us re-discover, the life-supporting foundations that continue to abound in (our) nature (Winn & Pogutz 2013).

Inspired by ecological embeddedness and sensemaking (Whiteman & Cooper, 2000; 2011), organization and management studies have very recently begun to embrace the possibility of deeper levels of human-nature entanglement, for example through industrial symbiosis (Walls & Paquin, 2015), venture synchronicity (Muñoz & Cohen, 2017), biomimicry (Mathews, 2011; Fernhaber & Stark, 2019), place-making (Shrivastava & Kennelly, 2013; Guthey et al. 2013; Masterson et al. 2017); relationality and relational agency (Good & Thorpe, 2020; Heikkurinen et al., 2021), and time-space (de)compression (Bansal & Knox-Hayes, 2013).

Re-connecting with nature requires a departure from dualistic rationality and a return to considering living beings as inherently worthy, regardless of their instrumental utility to humans, whilst respecting the intrinsic values of richness and ecological diversity. This special issue invites us to rethink how new relationships between modern human organizations and the natural world can be formed and maintained (Newton, 2002) and the many ways in which economic ecosystems can evolve in connection with ecological ones (Drengson, 2005).

With many of our life-giving ecosystems in decline, perhaps it is already too late. The proliferation of movements practicing and promoting ecological restoration and regeneration begs to differ.

### **3. The surge of regeneration and regenerative organizations**

Regenerative recipes have grown rapidly in adjacent fields (Young, 2000), such as agriculture, forestry, design, energy, planning, and conservation. Many regeneration experimental projects aimed at e.g. creating more sustainable food systems began to gain traction. These evolved into large organizations that operate under agro-ecological principles and practices, relating to permaculture, biodynamics, holistic management, and planned grazing (Risser, 1985; Savory, 1991; Rhodes, 2015). Regenerative organizations strive to restore the natural ecosystems and the communities these natural ecosystems support (Tomblin, 2009; Rhodes, 2012).

Our special issue invites management and organization scholars to regenerate. As a central attribute of living systems (Stinner et al. 1997), regeneration refers to "the capacity to bring into existence again". A system is regenerative if it preserves its inherent capacity to exist once more (Rhodes, 2017). Regeneration is not about fixing and protecting, but about working with nature (Hes & Du Plessis, 2014) in a way that allows a system to restore its capacity to continuously self-organize and evolve (Dias, 2018). From an ecological perspective, regenerative development entails expanding the ability of human and non-human living beings to co-evolve in a way that nurtures diversity, creativity, complexity, and life (Mang & Haggard, 2016). Regeneration is an interconnected process, where the healthy development of one form of life is inseparably connected to the healthy development of all others.

Management practice is warming up to the notion of regeneration, proliferating a variety of terms, e.g., regenerative agriculture, regenerative cultures (Wahl, 2016), regenerative design (Cole, 2012), regenerative capitalism (Fullerton, 2015), regenerative leadership (Storm & Hutchins, 2019) and regenerative business (Roland & Landua, 2015; Sanford, 2017). All these subdomains call for a gradual re-embedding of organizations in their socio-ecological systems and the new forms of value created through regenerative forms of organizing (Hahn & Tampe, 2021; Hernandez & Muñoz, 2021). As practices in sustainable management are changing in significant ways, so are the narratives and even the very meaning of “managing” (Perey & Benn, 2015) and “organizing” (Good & Thorpe, 2020). We observe decisive restorative actions, seamless dialogues, provocations, and joint action whereby life is let to re-emerge in nature and ecosystems to self-correct. Regeneration offers a fundamental shift in perspective whereby organizing responds to the needs for continued functioning and flourishing of social-ecological systems rather than based on the current goals and existing capabilities of a (disconnected) organization. This special issue calls for, and features, models of generative organizing that “enhance, and thrive through, the health of social-ecological systems in a co-evolutionary process” (Hahn & Tampe, 2021: 456).

To encapsulate this new phenomenon, we introduce the notion of regenerative organizing, as *the process of sensing and embracing surrounding living ecosystems, aligning organizational knowledge, decision-making, and actions to these systems’ structures and dynamics and acting in conjunction, in a way that allows for ecosystems to regenerate, build resilience and sustain life.* Regenerative organizations are not only ecologically embedded by design, but also designed to purposefully restore and regenerate degraded living ecosystems and deliberately build resilience in and improve the wellbeing of the communities relying on such ecosystems. The papers in this



special issue explore occasions and attempts of regenerative organizing, explaining how humans and nature can relearn how to co-create value in Anthropocene.

By reading these articles as a group, scholars will have a new appreciation of our position as social scientists facing natural ecosystems in rapid decline. At the core of the tensions we face as social scientists and management scholars - as we try to help businesses change the way they do things - is that distance between humans and non-human species. This is the heart of anthropocentrism and the many paradoxes we experience. Paradoxes can be either accepted, clarified, or solved by creating a new paradigm (Poole & van de Ven, 1989). We argue that a focus on regeneration can bring disciplines together and create affordances for a new environmental-social science.

As the papers in this special issue show, regenerative organizing is different from similar ideas emerging in adjacent fields, such as resilient organizations, prosocial organizing, positive organizing, and compassionate organizing. A resilient organization can maintain a high level of performance even when environmental pressures mount, threats increase, and uncertainties deepen. Positive organizing looks at how organizations can become generative places of excellence – inclusive, diverse, mindful – so that people can flourish (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2011). Prosocial organizations (Haigh et al. 2015; Stephan et al. 2016) refer to those that seek to create social value through market mechanisms. Compassion at work (Dutton et al. 2014) relates to the interpersonal process involving the noticing, feeling, sensemaking, and acting that alleviates the suffering of another person within an organization.

Regenerative organizing is different. Phenomenologically, it materializes at the intersection of the physical and the social. Ecological reasoning can help organizations to recognize new forms of value that fall outside our current economic models of utility. Regeneration enables

organizations to develop “co-creative partnership with nature [...] to restore and regenerate social-ecological systems” (du Plessis, 2012: 19) and create an integrated system with reciprocal feedbacks and interdependence” (Folke et al., 2010: 3).

#### **4. The papers in this special issue**

*Three Paradoxes of Climate Truth for the Anthropocene Social Scientist.* In this opening editorial, Jennings and Hoffman discuss the triple paradox faced by scholars working at the intersection of climate change and business: 1) eliminating the main driver, 2) objectivity with passion, and 3) double irrelevance. They explain how each of these three paradoxes emerge from the science of the Anthropocene and exacerbates the critical division between the natural and social sciences. Their editorial blazes a path forward by inviting us to balance this triple paradox.

*From Equivocality to Reflexivity in Biodiversity Protection.* Quarshie, Salmi, and Wu discover the reflexive processes of Finnish change-makers fighting against biodiversity loss. They explain why reflexivity is central to regenerative organizing. They show how silent conversations help changemakers make sense of the equivocality they face in natural ecosystems on the brink of collapse, so they can then design courses of action that allow them to tackle biodiversity issues.

*In Transition Toward the Ecocentric Entrepreneurship Nexus: How Nature Helps Entrepreneurs Make Venture More Regenerative Over Time.* By looking at Swedish farmers, Vlasov shows us how nature becomes a partner in an eco-centric venturing process through intimate, recursive, and informative exchanges, which progressively enables regeneration.

*“Nano” Regeneration: How Human Agency Intermediates Between Nature and Technology in Community-Based Energy.* Walther, Poldner, and Dentoni paint a hyper-localized view of regeneration through the examination of community-based energy projects in Germany. They

explain how we can begin to repair the lost connection with nature by imbricating the human and the technical with the natural.

*Managing the Paradoxes of Place to Foster Regeneration.* Drawing on a six-year inductive study in Fogo Island, Canada, Slawinski, Winsor, Mazutis, Schouten and Smith explore regeneration in a community devastated by the collapse of the North Atlantic cod fishery. They identify several place-based tensions and discovered that regeneration depends on how organizations respond to these tensions paradoxically.

*Strategizing Nature in Cross-Sector Partnerships: Can Plantation Revitalization Enable Living Wages?* Van Hille, De Bakker, Groenewegen and Ferguson<sup>1</sup> (2021) explain how transformative cross-sector partnerships revitalize tea plantations in Africa by reimagining temporal tensions as opportunities for ecosystem co-evolution.

*“Nature Cannot Be Fooled”: A Dual-Equilibrium Simulation of Climate Change.* In this essay, Sunny invites us to integrate the natural environment into management theories so that we can address the problem of global climate change. He uses a novel simulation to show how the laws of thermodynamics can work alongside market economics to address today’s pressing issues.

*Winds of Change: A Neo-Design Approach to the Regeneration of Regions.* In the closing invited editorial, Garud, Gehman and Karnøe offer a historical perspective on generation by re-enacting the dynamics associated with regions and how the emergence, decline, and regeneration of regions contribute to social well-being at a variety of scales. They elaborate on three mechanisms of regional regeneration: repurposing, experimentation, and collective learning.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was published in a previous issue, Volume 34 Issue 2, pp. 175–197.

## 5. Where do we go from here?

Regenerative organizing opens many avenues for future research. It extends the idea of organizing to take seriously the intersection between human and natural forms of resources, agency, and evolution. As we rekindle our connection with nature and shift from economic to ecological reasoning, future research can explore the affective, cognitive, and experiential aspects of what Nisbet et al. (2009) refer to as nature-relatedness. As regenerative organizing shifts the focus of human organizing to organizing *with and for nature*, conceptions such as systems, time, change, scope, and scale in organizing need to be reconsidered. The rhythm of nature is different from the rhythm of modern human organizations (Muñoz & Cohen, 2017). Atmospheric changes, as understood by climate scientists, evolve over millennia while social or industrial changes unfold over years or decades. The question of how we can deal with or reconcile these temporal spaces in our studies seems inevitable. The artificial demarcations we make that mark the scale of things or scope of action do not exist in nature.

As we advance the agenda of regenerative organizing in research and practice, we invite the reader to recognize places, species and organizations as intrinsically interconnected parts of living systems, instead of worrying where or when a regenerative organization begins and where it ends. We also invite a broadening of the notion of co-agency at the intersection of human and nature. If agency is the capacity of a human actor to act and produce a particular effect, what happens when the action is co-dependent with nature? When might regenerative organizations take a step back and let nature do its work? How might nature call forth or select for novel forms of agency? What forms of symbiosis emerge when we recognize our interdependence with nature and reclaim our birthright to connect and coevolve with nature as opposed to apart or against it?

As regeneration has begun to create abundant affordances in the new *environmental-social science*, we are committed to a growing community of inquiry toward an overdue *environmental-management science*. Climate is changing, rapidly, and humans and non-human species are suffering the consequences. Our planetary boundaries are creaking and cracking under the pressure of outdated value-creating practices that diminish, deplete, and destroy our life-giving human habitat. We hope this special issue offers an auspicious beginning for a life-giving scholarship. We invite the reader to immerse in the wisdom of the two editorials and six papers and reclaim the intersection of human and natural ecosystems as a vital arena for management and organization.

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